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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 003477

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SUBJECT: VENEZUELAN ELECTION UPDATE: SIX DAYS OUT

REF: CARACAS 003476

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Classified By: Robert Downes, Political Counselor,
For Reason 1.4(d)

Summary

[11](#). (C) Both opposition candidate Manuel Rosales and President Hugo Chavez took advantage of the last weekend of campaigning before the December 3 elections to stage some of the largest rallies seen in Venezuela in recent years. The OAS and EU electoral observation missions met with electoral officials but offered little in public statements. The National Electoral Council (CNE) reduced the number of credentialed observers for the electoral NGO Ojo Electoral to 400, opting instead to incorporate two other groups with leanings toward the government and the opposition, respectively. The BRV also issued a decree prohibiting public meetings and demonstrations on December 2-3 for reasons of public order, but drawing the ire of human rights groups and apparently targeting opposition plans to stage vigils to protect the vote outside of polling stations. Archbishop Baltazar Porras, in a pastoral letter, urged Venezuelans to vote their conscience in the election. End Summary.

Rosales Campaign

[12](#). (C) Hundreds of thousands of Rosales supporters turned out November 25 in Caracas for the final mass rally in Caracas (Reftel covers this and the November 26 Chavez march). Rosales followed up with a trademark "avalanche" rally in Carabobo. He is expected to close his campaign formally on Wednesday in Maracaibo.

Chavez Campaign

[13](#). (U) While Rosales conducted his rally in Caracas, Chavez continued his breathless inauguration of public works with the opening of two metro rail stations, begun in the late 80s, in Rosales' home state of Maracaibo. Chavez promised billions more in social spending for 2007.

Observers

14. (C) EU and OAS Electoral Observation Missions (EOMs). All but one of the 120-odd members of the EU EOM are on the ground. Unfortunately two observers were robbed over the weekend and one of those is hospitalized for injuries sustained during the incident. The Finnish Ambassador confirmed to Polcouns that the EU EOM does not plan to make any public statement until December 5, two days after the election. Eighty short-term EU observers will begin training on November 27 and will be dispatched outside Caracas on November 29. Press reports say that OAS Mission Chief Juan Enrique Fischer and EU Chief Monica Frassoni met with National Electoral Council (CNE) President Tibisay Lucena November 27, though senior military officials in charge of safeguarding the election process failed to show for the meeting. The two EOM chiefs offered only brief comments to the press to comment on the cordial nature of the meeting. Separately the Canadian DCM Vicken Koundakjian reports that the OAS EOM will include members of the Canadian diplomatic mission and that the Dutch government is providing the OAS EOM a contribution of USD 100,000. Koundakjian had been unable to reach the OAS EOM to confirm whether they will also include diplomats from other member Embassies.

15. (C) Domestic Observers. The CNE will accredit only 400 of Ojo Electoral's 1,000 observers to cover some of the more than 11,000 polling centers, according to the National Democratic Institute (NDI). An NDI technician told Emboffs this is a completely arbitrary number. At the same time, the CNE is accrediting 350 observers of the Asamblea de Educadores (a pro-opposition group), and 50 from Radar de los Barrios, a network of neighborhood groups with heavy pro-Chavez representation. (Note: The Asamblea de Educadores was decried in 2004 by the BRV for having received NED funding; they have been working for two years to moderate

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their image as a hard-opposition organization.) (Comment: The conventional wisdom behind the decision is a desire balance the domestic observers along the political spectrum, though it has the impact of severely limiting Ojo Electoral, the group with the most training and experience.)

CNE/BRV Actions

16. (C) The Ministry of Interior and Justice (MIJ) issued on November 25 a resolution prohibiting during December 2-3 all public meetings and demonstrations that might affect the electoral process. The resolution claimed the prohibition was to maintain order. The human rights NGO PROVEA denounced the resolution as criminalizing protest before the fact and said it could result in detentions and prosecutions of peaceful protesters. (Comment: It is likely this measure is targeted at the opposition's public call for voters to maintain vigils outside of polling stations on election night to "defend the vote.")

Other Developments

17. (SBU) Former president of the Episcopal Conference of Venezuela (CEV) and Archbishop of Merida Baltazar Porras released a written pastoral exhortation for the November 26 mass calling on all Venezuelans to participate in the December 3 vote, "for the future of Venezuela." Porras urged voters to make their choice based on the positions of the candidates and not out of "emotion, irrationality, or convenience." Porras, an ardent Chavez critic during his tenure leading the CEV, is currently the CEV's communications secretary.

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